“JOYFUL SORROW”

I LOVE WILLARD LIBRARY.

ASIDE FROM THE LEGENDARY GHOST OF WILLARD, IT HAS SUCH A GREAT HISTORY & IT’S SUCH A FRIENDLY & COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT.

IN ADDITION TO THE INCREDIBLE GENEAOLOGY DEPARTMENT, WILLARD HAS NEARLY EVERY BOOK I EVER NEED.

I SAY “NEARLY” BECAUSE NOT LONG AGO I WAS LOOKING FOR A NEWLY-PUBLISHED BOOK THAT WILLARD DIDN’T YET HAVE.

“NO PROBLEM,” SAID THE LIBRARIAN. “WE’LL ORDER IT.”

I ASKED IF THEY WOULD BE PURCHASING IT ANYWAY AND SHE SAID, “I’M NOT SURE, BUT WE
LOVE TO ORDER BOOKS FOR PEOPLE. I’LL LET YOU KNOW WHEN IT COMES IN.”

AND, SURE ENOUGH, WITHIN 10 DAYS OR SO, I GOT A CALL TELLING ME IT HAD ARRIVED.

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE BOOK FROM OUR SON, DAVID WHO, WITH A PHILOSOPHY DEGREE, ALWAYS LETS ME KNOW ABOUT FASCINATING NEW BOOKS THAT COVER BIZARRE TOPICS.

THIS ONE HAPPENED TO BE CENTERED ON THE MOST-COMMONLY-USED NOUN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

THAT LITTLE DETAIL SURPRISED ME AS MUCH AS ANYTHING AND SENT ME TO WILLARD IN SEARCH OF THE BOOK THAT FOCUSED ON THAT MOST-COMMONLY-USED NOUN.
WHAT ALL OF THAT HAS TO DO WITH THIS PASSAGE IS PERHAPS UP FOR DISCUSSION.

AS WE CONSIDER THESE WORDS AT THE VERY END OF LUKE’S GOSPEL, IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO CONSIDER WHAT THE PREVIOUS WEEKS HAD BEEN LIKE FOR THE DISCIPLES.

THEY’VE BEEN ON A ROLLER-COASTER OF EMOTIONS.

GO ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE RAISING OF LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD.

THIS HAD TO BE ONE OF THE MOUNTAINTOP MOMENTS IN THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH JESUS.

THEIR FRIEND LAZARUS HAD BEEN DEAD FOR FOUR DAYS.

HE HAD BEEN WRAPPED IN BURIAL CLOTHS & LAID IN A TOMB.
AND THEN, WITH SIMPLY A COMMAND –  
“LAZARUS, COME FORTH!” – JESUS BRINGS HIM BACK FROM THE DEAD. 
BUT HOW QUICKLY THEY WENT FROM THAT PINNACLE OF ECSTASY TO THE DEEPEST VALLEY OF DOOM AS THEY WATCHED JESUS DIE ON THE CROSS. 
AH, BUT AGAIN, HOW QUICKLY THINGS CHANGED WHEN HE CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD & ENTERED THEIR LIVES ONCE MORE. 
BUT THEN COMES ASCENSION DAY. 
ONCE AGAIN, THE ROLLER-COASTER RIDE TAKES THEM INTO A DARK VALLEY OF DESPAIR. 
LUKE TELLS US “…HE WITHDREW FROM THEM AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN.” 
AND NOW HE’S GONE FOR GOOD.
YOU EXPECT THE NEXT LINE FROM LUKE TO BE SOMETHING LIKE – “AND THE DISCIPLES WERE FILLED WITH ANGUISH, HANGING THEIR HEADS IN DESPAIR & GRIEF.”

WHAT ELSE COULD THEY BE FEELING BUT DESPAIR, GRIEF & SORROW!? THEIR AGONY & HEARTBREAK WOULD HAVE BEEN OVERWHELMING.

“What do we do now? How do we carry on without him? After coming back from the dead, how can he leave us alone like this?”

All of these thoughts surely would have been running through their minds.

But Luke doesn’t say anything like that.
INSTEAD HE SAYS, “…HE WITHDREW FROM THEM AND WAS CARRIED UP INTO HEAVEN. AND THEY WORSHIPED HIM, AND RETURNED TO JERUSALEM WITH GREAT JOY…”

IT DOESN’T SEEM TO MAKE SENSE, DOES IT? WHY WOULD THEY REACT WITH JOY WHEN THEY LOGICALLY SHOULD HAVE BEEN FILLED WITH SORROW?

THEIR FRIEND, THEIR LEADER, THEIR SAVIOR IS LEAVING THEM, SEEMINGLY FOREVER.

HOW COULD THEY POSSIBLY BE EXPERIENCING WHAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS “JOYFUL SORROW?”

HERE’S WHAT I THINK IT IS.

I THINK WE HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD THE ASCENSION – AT LEAST PARTIALLY.
THERE’S A CHURCH IN NORFOLK, ENGLAND THAT HAS A NUMBER OF ALTARS.

ONE OF THOSE ALTARS IS DEDICATED TO THE FEAST OF THE ASCENSION.

TRY TO GET A PICTURE OF THIS IN YOUR MIND.

ABOVE THE ALTAR IS A SCULPTURE OF CLOUDS, CARVED IN WOOD.

FROM THE MIDST OF THESE CLOUDS, THERE ARE TWO FEET PROTRUDING.

SOMEONE WHO SAW IT SUGGESTED IT REMINDED THEM OF THE REMAINS OF THE WICKED WITCH IN “THE WIZARD OF OZ.”

BUT, AS SILLY AS IT SEEMS, THAT’S THE PICTURE WE HAVE OF THE ASCENSION.

JESUS IS LIFTED UP & A CLOUD TAKES HIM OUT OF THE SIGHT OF THE DISCIPLES.
BUT, YOU SEE, HERE’S THE PROBLEM WE RUN INTO - WHEN WE WONDER WHERE HE WENT & WHEN WE ASK THAT QUESTION, WE ASK IT IN TERMS OF GEOGRAPHY OR PHYSICAL LOCATION. WHERE IS THE PLACE THAT JESUS WENT WHEN HE ASCENDED?

I THINK WE CAN CATCH A CLUE FROM THE REACTION OF THE DISCIPLES.

WHAT DOES LUKE SAY THEY DID?

“…THEY WORSHIPED HIM, AND RETURNED TO JERUSALEM WITH GREAT JOY; AND THEY WERE CONTINUALLY IN THE TEMPLE BLESSING GOD.”

OKAY, THINK ABOUT THIS.

NOT ONLY DID THEY GO WITH GREAT JOY, BUT WHERE IS IT THEY WENT?

THEY WENT TO JERUSALEM.
THEY WENT TO THE TEMPLE.

NOW HERE WAS A GROUP OF MEN WHO, AFTER THE RESURRECTION, WERE TERRIFIED AS THEY LOOKED TO THE FUTURE.

THEY WERE AFRAID OF THE ROMANS.

THEY WERE AFRAID OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

THEY WERE AFRAID FOR THEIR VERY LIVES.

BUT HERE WE’RE TOLD THEY RETURNED TO JERUSALEM – NOT IN SADNESS & SORROW, NOT IN FEAR & TERROR – BUT WITH GREAT JOY!

THEY WENT IN JOYFUL SORROW.

NOW WHY WOULD THAT BE?

WHY – FIRST OF ALL, WOULD THEY RETURN TO JERUSALEM - AND WHY WOULD THEY DO SO WITH GREAT JOY?
WELL, FIRST OF ALL, THEY RETURNED TO JERUSALEM BECAUSE THAT’S WHERE JESUS TOLD THEM TO GO.

AND SECONDLY, THEY RETURNED WITH GREAT JOY BECAUSE THEY UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING ABOUT THE ASCENSION THAT WE HAVEN’T QUITE BEEN ABLE TO GRASP.

WHAT’S OUR TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE ASCENSION?

WHY DID THE ASCENSION HAVE TO TAKE PLACE?

HAVEN’T WE ALWAYS BEEN TAUGHT THAT JESUS TOOK UP HIS HEAVENLY DOMINION OVER ALL CREATION?

HAVEN’T WE LEARNED THAT JESUS HAD TO LEAVE THE EARTH BECAUSE, WHILE HE WAS HERE,
HE WAS CONFINED TO BEING IN ONE PLACE BUT AFTER HE ASCENDED HE COULD BE ANYWHERE & EVERYWHERE?

THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT.

I BELIEVE ALL OF THAT IS TRUE.

BUT WHY NOT TAKE IT A STEP FURTHER & UNDERSTAND THAT WITH THE ASCENSION, JESUS WAS NO LONGER CONSTRAINED, NOT ONLY BY PLACE, BUT BY TIME AS WELL?

AND THERE IT IS – THAT MOST-COMMONLY-USED WORD IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE – TIME.

THE BOOK THAT WILLARD LIBRARY ORDERED FOR ME IS ENTITLED WHY TIME FLIES – A MOSTLY SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION.
THE AUTHOR, ALAN BURDICK, SAYS, “HERE’S ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT I LEARNED ABOUT TIME.

I WOULD GO AROUND TO SCIENTISTS AND ASK THEM – ‘WHAT IS TIME EXACTLY?’

AND THEY WOULD ALL TURN IT AROUND ON ME AND SAY, ‘WELL, WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY TIME?’

THE POINT BEING THAT WHAT WE CALL TIME IS ACTUALLY A LOT OF DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES.

IT’S UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE TIME OF DAY IS, BUT IT’S ALSO UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEFORE AND AFTER.”

I TRIED READING BURDICK’S BOOK, DIDN’T GET THROUGH IT IN THE TIME ALOTTED, AND RENEWED IT.
THAT STILL WASN’T ENOUGH TIME, SO I RETURNED IT, AND AFTER WHAT I THOUGHT WAS A SUITABLE PERIOD OF TIME FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO HAVE A CRACK AT IT, WENT BACK TO WILLARD AND CHECKED IT OUT A SECOND TIME!

FOR THOSE SKEPTICAL ABOUT “TIME” BEING THE MOST-COMMONLY-USED WORD IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE – IN THE PREVIOUS TWO SENTENCES, I USED THE WORD FOUR TIMES – OH, THERE IT IS AGAIN!

TIME IS A VERY CONFUSING CONCEPT!

BURDICK – ALONG WITH MOST OTHERS WHO HAVE STUDIED TIME – TURNS TO ST. AUGUSTINE AS ONE OF THE EARLIEST TO HAVE EXPLORED THIS VAST MYSTERY.
ACCORDING TO BURDICK, AUGUSTINE WOULD SAY, “THERE IS ONLY NOW.
THERE'S NO PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.
THERE'S ONLY YOUR CURRENT AWARENESS OF THE PAST, WHICH IS YOUR MEMORY.

AND THERE'S ONLY YOUR CURRENT AWARENESS OF THE FUTURE, WHICH IS EXPECTATION.

AND THERE'S ONLY YOUR CURRENT AWARENESS OF THE PRESENT, WHICH IS YOUR ATTENTION.”

THIS CONFUSION & MYSTERY ABOUT TIME CREATES A PROBLEM FOR US AS WE TRY TO UNDERSTAND SOMETHING AS INCOMPREHENSIBLE AS THE ASCENSION.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT WE THINK OF HEAVEN AS ANOTHER PLACE, AS THERE ARE PLACES IN THE WORLD.
IF JESUS ASCENDS TO HEAVEN, THEN HE MUST GO TO THAT OTHER \textit{PLACE}. 

BUT THAT DOESN’T SEEM TO BE ALL THAT LUKE IS TELLING US HERE & IT’S SOMETHING THE DISCIPLES SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND. 

THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT, WHEREVER THEY WENT, JESUS WOULD BE THERE. 

AND THAT ISN’T CONFINED TO A \textit{PLACE}. 

IT MEANS THAT JESUS IS IN EVERY FUTURE TIME & EVERY FUTURE EXPERIENCE WE WILL EVER GO THROUGH. 

IN BOTH MATTHEW’S & MARK’S ACCOUNT OF THE RESURRECTION, WHEN HIS FOLLOWERS LOOK FOR JESUS AT THE EMPTY TOMB, THEY ARE TOLD, “\textit{HE HAS GONE AHEAD OF YOU}.”
OUR LIMITED HUMAN COMPREHENSION PREVENTS US FROM THINKING OF THAT AS ANYTHING BUT JESUS GOING AHEAD OF THEM TO A PLACE – A PHYSICAL LOCATION WHERE THEY WILL SEE HIM.

DON’T CONFINE YOURSELF TO THAT WAY OF THINKING.

YES – JESUS WILL BE IN WHATEVER PLACE YOU FIND YOURSELF.

BUT HE WILL ALSO BE IN WHATEVER CIRCUMSTANCE YOU FIND YOURSELF BECAUSE HE HAS GONE AHEAD OF YOU IN TIME AS WELL.

IN EVERY EVENT, EVERY TRIAL, EVERY PAINFUL ORDEAL, EVERY JOYOUS EXPERIENCE IN TIME THAT AWAITS YOU IN THE FUTURE – JESUS IS ALREADY THERE!
GOD GIVES US THE ASSURANCE THAT IN EVERY FUTURE MOMENT OF OUR LIVES, JESUS IS THERE.

WHEN A LOVED ONE UNEXPECTEDLY DIES, JESUS IS ALREADY THERE IN THAT FUTURE MOMENT, WAITING TO COMFORT US.

WHEN THE DOCTOR DELIVERS GRIM NEWS ABOUT OUR HEALTH, JESUS IS THERE TO SEE US THROUGH.

WHEN A JOB IS TERMINATED & OUR DREAMS LIE IN RUINS, JESUS IS ALREADY THERE TO HELP US PICK UP THE PIECES & LOOK AHEAD WITH HOPE.

FOR THOSE WHO ARE GRADUATING, WHEN THEY STEP INTO THE WORLD IN A NEW VENTURE, JESUS IS ALREADY THERE TO WALK BY THEIR SIDE & LEAD THEM INTO THE FUTURE HE HAS PREPARED FOR THEM.
YOU SEE, THAT’S THE PART OF THE ASCENSION THAT THE DISCIPLES SAW THAT WE HAVEN’T QUITE LEARNED TO GRASP.

THAT’S WHY THEY “RETURNED TO JERUSALEM WITH GREAT JOY.”

YES, THEY RETURNED WITH JOYFUL SORROW.

AS YOU LOOK AHEAD, BE ASSURED THAT ALL THE PLACES & ALL THE TIMES THAT STAND BEFORE YOU, ARE PLACES AND TIMES WHERE JESUS ALREADY RESIDES. AMEN.

The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana